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AUTHOR	Thompson, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction reviews issues surrounding competency testing and describes Wisconsin's response to a nationwide effort to enhance student learning through competency based education. Efforts of the past two decades to improve traditional educational practice in Wisconsin are outlined. Political, legal, education, technical, and financial parameters of competency testing are also assessed. Finally, the implementation of improved educational practices in the public secondary schools and the relationship of these to student competency evaluation are considered. (Author/APM)

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THE WISCONSIN APPROACH TO INDIVIDUALIZED COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

Barbara Thompson
State Superintendent
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

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"The Wisconsin Approach to Individualized
Competency Development and Evaluation"

Barbara Thompson, Ph.D.
State Superintendent
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

This paper presents a review of issues surrounding competency testing and Wisconsin's response to a nationwide effort to enhance student learning through competency based education. These developments are viewed as part of an ongoing effort to provide assurance to the public that the graduates of our public schools have acquired the necessary basic understandings and skills to enable them to become effective, particpating adults in society.

These issues and their impact on Wisconsin education are explored in this paper from three major points of view. First, the efforts of the past two decades to improve upon traditional educational practice in Wisconsin are briefly described as background information. Second, an assessment of political, legal, educational, technical, and financial parameters of competency testing are offered as viewed from the position of State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Third, thoughts regarding the implementation of improved educational practices in our public secondary schools and the relationship of these to student competency evaluation are presented in the context of recommendations, observations and questions; all meriting further research.

Background

Historically, Wisconsin has provided a climate in which public elementary, secondary and higher education are favorably regarded and strongly supported by parents and the state legislature. Educational innovation is widely accepted and generally high levels of achievement and high school completion

have prevailed in our state. There is a long tradition of local school district autonomy and few legislative requirements have been imposed upon Wisconsin's many school districts (433 in 1979-80) in the areas of curriculum, instruction and pupil testing. Specific instructional requirements in legislation are broadly stated and general in nature.

Results of a public opinion survey in 1977 indicated that 65 percent of Wisconsin respondents gave their local school system a letter grade of A or B while only 10 percent gave their local schools a grade of D or F. The survey also revealed, however, that half of the respondents believed that current high school graduates have less developed skills than the graduates of 20 years ago. In this survey, 81 percent of the respondents favored a minimum competency test for high school graduation and 82 percent favored the establishment of these standards at the local district level. It would appear, therefore, that while the public generally holds a positive perception of their local schools, it feels a need for more specific and rigorous standards, comparable performance levels among school districts, and minimum competency requirements for high school graduation. This has not been translated into legislative proposals nor served as the basis for further initiatives in the area of competency testing by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

None of the many advisory groups to the State Superintendent have advocated the development of a competency testing mandate by the SEA (State Education Agency). There also has been no widespread demand by professional education organizations in Wisconsin for the enactment of competency testing legislation.

Competency Based Education

The Research and Development Center for Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has, over the past 20 years, developed and disseminated information about innovation in education. This organization developed

Individually Guided Education (IGE) programs in the mid-1960s, including the Wisconsin Design for Reading and the Wisconsin Design for Mathematics. These were essentially CBE (Competency Based Education) programs and were widely adopted nationwide. Prior to becoming State Superintendent, I worked within the State Department as a facilitator for IGE, developing awareness of the program for school district administrators, principals and teachers. Seventy-five school districts in Wisconsin (17%), involving some 200 buildings, adopted IGE.

One particularly intriguing aspect of IGE is the system for individualized instruction. State goals are used as a basis to develop local community goals, district goals, building goals, and student group goals. The students and parents participate in setting goals for all levels, especially for small groups and for the individual student.

Most of the elements of CBE are incorporated in the IGE programs; however competency testing is not usually the basis for promotion or graduation within IGE. Instructional programs are based on goals, and assessment is used to determine where each youngster is within his or her own instructional program. Instruction and assessment are criterion referenced or goal-referenced. Students are expected to achieve at some minimum level with respect to each goal. The schools continue to utilize norm referenced standardized tests, such as the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, for diagnostic and comparison purposes. A record of student achievement follows the student from grades K through 12, assisting in determining the instructional program from year to year. The involvement of students and parents in setting instructional goals is a vital aspect of IGE. When parents are involved in setting goals with their child, they are better able to support and assist the instructional process. Students in traditional educational programs are generally left out of the goal setting process, but this is not the case in IGE.

At the present time, Wisconsin school districts may voluntarily develop CBE/T programs if they so desire to meet demands for local accountability and to address other local needs. In a 1979 statewide survey, it was found that 22 percent of the responding school districts indicated that they were either developing or exploring the possibility of such programs. However, in Wisconsin, presently, it appears that there is no strong grassroots movement toward competency testing requirements for graduation or for any other purpose. As State Superintendent, I have not supported or advocated the passage of mandatory competency testing legislation but, rather, have supported the initiatives of individual local districts in the development and implementation of CBE programs based upon local needs, values, issues, and resources. General guidelines for LEAs wishing to initiate CBE/T programs have been developed and published by the Department of Public Instruction. Technical assistance is provided to districts by Department curriculum specialists and testing and measurement personnel.

Goals and Education

As part of the accountability movement in the early 1970s, state educational goals were developed and adopted by the Department in 1975. These are comprehensive statements of student outcomes and have not been translated into specific instructional objectives or testing programs on a statewide basis. Efforts are now underway to establish priorities among the goals and to translate and interpret them into instructional objectives which can be incorporated into the local curriculum. There are 41 subgoals under 11 major goals relating to Self-Realization, Human Relations, Basic Skills, Mental and Physical Health, Career Education and Occupational Competence, Cultural Appreciation, Lifelong Learning, Citizenship and Political Understanding, Economic Understanding, Physical Environment and Creative, Constructive and Critical Thinking.

Pupil Assessment

The Wisconsin state legislature established in 1971 a statewide pupil assessment of educational achievement in fundamental subject areas, a program to be administered by the Department of Public Instruction. Since 1975, a random sample of pupils in selected grade levels have been tested statewide in such areas as mathematics, reading, geometry, economic understanding and writing. These are objective referenced tests developed through widespread involvement of professional educators and various publics. A science test is currently being developed for implementation in the near future. In addition to the objective referenced tests, the pupil assessment program utilizes the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, a nationally used norm referenced test battery, to provide information at grades 4, 8, and 12 in the areas of reading, language, and mathematics. Results of pupil performance in all areas, as measured by both instruments, have generally been perceived as being at relatively high levels. Although there has been some public debate and criticism of the testing program and instruments, there appears to be widespread agreement that Wisconsin students are performing at reasonably high levels in these various basic skills areas.

In addition to the state level information, which is obtained and disseminated annually, the assessment program includes a local option component permitting local school districts to use the state devised tests and scoring services to serve their respective curriculum evaluation and pupil assessment needs. An instructional objectives item bank is being developed which will enable local districts to formulate customized tests in the areas of reading and mathematics related specifically to local instructional objectives and programs.

Because of this on-going combination of testing, legislators and educators and the general public seem to believe that the current assessment program is adequate. It appears that enactment of mandatory competency testing requirements at the state level would be perceived as imposing another layer of expense and testing unnecessarily duplicating what is already being done at the local level. A state mandated system would also raise serious questions

and issues related to the instructional uniqueness now possible within local districts. In addition, mandatory competency testing would probably have negative consequences in the areas of curriculum development and implementation, particularly with regard to restricting the scope and depth of the curriculum to objectives covered in the state tests.

Recent legislative initiatives have included the enactment of a mandatory reading program in each local school district and the adoption of 13 educational standards. These, together with the state pupil assessment program, state imposed cost controls for local districts, and the discretion which local districts have regarding CBE/T implementation, have served to reduce pressures for the enactment of mandatory competency based education and/or testing legislation.

The prevailing attitude of caution in Wisconsin regarding state mandated competency testing programs is also evidenced by the position of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC). This association is on record calling for increased competency testing and remediation for students in meeting minimum skill levels. However, such programs are supported only if developed and implemented at the local level with significant teacher participation in the total process. Concern has been expressed by WEAC representatives that a state mandated competency testing program might be used to impose unfair teacher personnel practices in the state.

It is evident that Wisconsin has been gradually moving toward implementation of most of the competency based education concepts without a specific legislative mandate. Few school districts have implemented a competency based testing program as part of the requirements for graduation. There is, nevertheless, the very real possibility that efforts already underway will surface in the future to legislatively require a competency test based high school graduation requirement with statewide standards, similar to requirements in at least

15 other states at this time. It will be important, therefore, to have the best information possible regarding major political, legal, educational, technical and financial considerations involved in such an undertaking.

Some of these major considerations, which largely determine whether, when, and in what form competency testing may appropriately take place, especially as a requirement for high school graduation for all students in our public schools, are reviewed in the following three sections. All of these issues are closely interwoven and difficult to separate.

Political Trends

Politically, the most salient issues at this moment appear to be concerns about increasing costs of education in a time of declining enrollment and concerns regarding drop-out rates and declining school achievement. Minority groups are increasingly alarmed about developments which limit opportunities, especially in the job market. The handicapped are strongly advocating greater access to opportunities in education and the job market. While legislative bodies generally seem willing to move in the direction of state mandated standards in education, few seem willing to provide state education agencies adequate funds to monitor LEA (Local Education Agency) compliance and to provide the technical assistance required by such mandates.

These political trends are generally unsupportive of further efforts to raise high school graduation requirements in those states which have not already adopted competency requirements for high school graduation. Some employers, responding to civil rights legislation, seem less interested than years ago in whether a candidate for an entry level job has a high school diploma or not. This in turn has, I suspect, contributed to the drop-out rate and a slightly reduced school achievement rate. The value of a diploma appears to be diminishing in some areas of the market place while educators and the public have been trying to enhance the meaning of the diploma.

Federal pressures under the Education Amendments of 1978 (P.L. 95-561), however, will continue to encourage states to establish state pupil achievement standards and assess pupil performance in relation to such standards. Therefore it appears highly likely that the momentum toward competency based education will continue to accelerate in all states without a concommitant increase in competency test based graduation requirements. This effect will be greatly enhanced by recent judicial recognitional that comptency testing cannot be imposed without the prior implementation of a CBE program designed to assure that students have been taught the competencies assessed by the measurement instruments.

Due Process Concerns

Florida's recent experience - Debra P. vs. Turlington - is extremely persuasive in regard to due process requirements for establishing minimal competency standards for graduation. Florida enacted the Educational Accountability Act of 1976 which required that, starting in 1979, students must demonstrate "satisfactory performance in functional literacy" as a condition for receiving the traditional high school diploma.

A "functional literacy test (FLT)" was developed and administered for the first time to high school juniors in October 1977. The test was designed to determine whether students could successfully apply basic skills to everyday life situations (e.g., whether students could comparison shop, compute interest on a loan, or read a road map). The Class of 1979 had three opportunities to pass the FLT. High school seniors failing the test on all attempts would receive a "certificate of completion" instead of a diploma.

In October of 1978, a group of Black students sued the State Commissioner of Education, arguing that the test requirement for graduation unfairly discriminated against minorities who had experienced segregation in the Florida

public schools and that they had been given insufficient warning of the new standards. U.S. District Court Judge George C. Carr subsequently halted implementation of the Florida diploma standards until the 1982-83 school year. Judge Carr's decision was the first official statement on the impact of federal civil rights law on setting competency testing standards for graduation. His decision and several others need to be examined carefully for relevance across the nation.

In the case of Washington vs. Davis (1976), the Court made it clear that a state-imposed testing requirement does not violate the Fourteenth Amendment equal protection clause just because it has a disparate effect on minorities. The burden of such proof is a heavy one. Judge Carr was provided evidence that the Florida Department of Education had "first hand knowledge" of the FLT's impact on Black students. However, the evidence was not proof that the diploma standards were adopted because of the anticipated failure among Blacks.

The Supreme Court has ruled that school districts which have previously practiced unlawful racial segregation are now required to remedy any effects of the previous racial segregation; including not perpetuating the effects of that prior discrimination. In Florida, race is a better predictor of success on the FLT than any other factor, including socio-economic status. The disadvantage imposed by competency based graduation requirements adopted without adequate provision for remediation is obvious. Therefore, Judge Carr delayed the Florida competency based diploma requirement for four years and permitted the placement of students who failed the FLT into remedial classes. The court can extend its decree at a later date if the effects of past segregation are still present. Federal civil rights law does authorize the court to demand that school officials demonstrate that racial disparities in educational outcomes are not the result of inequality in the instructional programs they operate.

Perhaps the most legally innovative ruling by Judge Carr in the Florida case was his recognition that the granting or withholding of a diploma involves both property and liberty interests safeguarded by the due process clause. The property interest lies in the benefits of public instruction while the liberty interest lies in freedom from state-imposed stigma and in freedom to pursue a livelihood. Judge Carr decided that the implementation schedule of the FLT was too short to provide sufficient notice required by the due process clause. While Judge Carr noted flaws of "considerable magnitude" in the FLT, he stated that these did not "cross the line between inadequacy and constitutional infirmity." He concluded that the FLT items were adequately related to the specified objectives of the test and therefore had content validity.

A number of legal questions surrounding competency test based graduation and promotion requirements which were not addressed by Judge Carr in the Debra P. vs. Turlington caseowill no doubt soon emerge. These include, for example,

- Must bilingual students be assessed in their primary language and must test content relate to life skills in ethnic cultures?
- Should state standards for handicapped students be different or should they receive a different diploma?
- Are such differences evidence of discrimination under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973?
- What constitutes adequate curricular and instructional validity of a test - proof that the student was provided adequate opportunities to learn the proficiencies assessed by the test?
- What are the characteristics of a "constitutionally infirm" test?
- Are schools which certify a student's competencies negligent if the student later is shown not to be able to demonstrate those competencies in real-life situations?

- Is it fair to have <u>different</u> standards for different students in a state, a district, a building, or a classroom for promotion or graduation?
- Is it fair to have the <u>same</u> standards for all students in a state, a district, a building or even a classroom?

<u>Conclusions</u>

Careful review of these legal findings seems to lead to the conclusion that it <u>may</u> be possible to establish statewide graduation and promotion requirements involving competency testing which will successfully meet all legal challenges. However, it is evident that such standards must not be imposed until it can be satisfactorily documented that:

1. All students in the state have been given a fair and equal opportunity to receive appropriate instruction in the assessed proficiencies;
2. The assessed proficiencies have been determined to be appropriate for all students taking the tests;
3. The assessment system is valid and reliable;
4. All students have been given several opportunities for taking the tests and obtaining remedial instruction;
5. The standards accomplish the accountability objectives established for them by the public; and,
6. The necessary instructional programs have been in place many years before the affected students are assessed relative to graduation.

It seems most apparent that it is not advisable, given these conditions, for a state to implement a competency based test graduation requirement for four or five years hence. More years are required to work through the process of developing the prerequisite CBE programs and the assessment system and the training of teaching staff. Judicial findings suggest a minimum of five to six years of subsequent program implementation prior to initiating the competency test based graduation requirement. Therefore, it would seem that

a minimum of eight years lead time should be incorporated into any local school district or state mandated competency test based graduation program in order to develop a valid assessment effort. Legislators considering such mandated graduation requirements must be made aware of and support a deliberate, systematic approach to CBE.

CBE And The Educator

Educationally, the issues surrounding competency testing based graduation requirements and competency based education are profoundly complex. The multiple purposes perceived for the concept of competency based education contribute to this complexity. CBE is viewed as providing a means for monitoring pupil progress, for providing information to the public, for certifying the competence of students for promition or graduation, for determining teachers' effectiveness in relation to pupil achievement, for stimulating system change and reform and, quite probably, for other remedies to concerns surrounding education's viability. In January 1979, a review of CBE was published through my office. In this review, CBE was identified as an educational process which is:

1. based on clearly identified or prescribed behaviors and outcomes using designed instructional packages or units directed to those outcomes;
2. embraces variable approaches and flexible time frames;
3. emphasizes problem-solving approaches which make measurement and assessment integral aspects of instruction;
4. certifies possession of standards based competence for promotion and graduation;
5. provides remediation for those who fail; and,
6. provides data and information by which officials make system changes and reforms with the potential to increase student and school performance.

All of these aspects generate controversial discussion. For example, in the measurement of student performance, who will be responsible to measure and certify competence? There are advocates who believe the federal government should be the court of last resort in measurement and testing. Others believe that since education is a state function, the state should be responsible for measuring, assessing, and certifying possession of competencies. Still others will point out that the local school district is responsible for instruction and curriculum, therefore, it is at this level that the responsibility for assessing instructional outcomes resides. Practical realities probably will dictate that all three levels - federal, state and local - will be involved; especially if comparative data between districts and states are desired (This is another issue!)

The use of standards for promotion or graduation brings up the matter of minimums and optimums of performance. Should one standard be set for all students; or should each individual student's abilities, special talents, family background, and/or other factors which affect learning be considered? Should multiple standards instead of single standards be established? If a single standard is set, what will prevent that minimum from becoming an operating maximum?

Despite the complexity of the issues surrounding competency based education, I feel that such programs are worthy of consideration by school officials. This is based on the positive results reported by a number of school districts in Wisconsin and other states which have adopted various forms of CBE.

The funding of state mandated competency based educational programs remains a major issue for local school districts and SEAs. Costs reported from other states range from estimates that a CBE effort may cost little more than traditional educational programs to estimates that the cost of CBE is at least 50% higher than traditional schooling.

Wisconsin has considerable experience over the past several years in monitoring compliance with state mandated standards as a result of the 13 Standards (Wis. Stats. 121.02(1)) which were enacted in 1973. These standards are rather general and limited in scope, with the exception of the standard for the education of the handicapped. At one time, we had several staff members engaged in monitoring compliance with 12 of the Standards but now all but one of these positions which sought local school district compliance with legislated standards have been eliminated by the legislature. Only in the area of handicapped programs and services does the Department have adequate monitoring and technical assistance staff.

Thus, it seems clear that if there are to be state mandated standards which require state monitoring, consideration must be given to adequate funding for sufficient staff to provide for on-site reviews, technical assistance and public hearings. State legislatures are not always willing to provide the necessary resources to carry out adequate SEA assistance and monitoring activities with regard to mandated programs. State legislatures are generally unwilling to tie state aids to local compliance with a mandate related to student achievement. Further, state legislatures must understand that the development of a state mandated [illegible] program at the local level requires a long-term commitment to expanded and continuing state aids to local school districts for additional staff and increased curricular offerings. Teacher training institutions, in turn, must participate in the research and development of such programs and the training and up-grading of staff. This will also require additional fiscal support for these university programs.

Recommendations and Research Questions

In light of the foregoing considerations, several recommendations and questions for further research can be posited with regard to CBE and competency assessment.

RECOMMENDATIONS. Public elementary and secondary education should move toward an improved educational program in which:

1. individualized competency development and assessment are fostered at all grade levels;
2. optimum achievement for each and every child is clearly defined on a continuing basis;
3. teachers, students and parents work closely together on a regular basis to establish objectives, advise, counsel and monitor progress;
4. large group, small group, and individualized instruction are utilized;
5. community learning experiences are integral to the program including a broad range of work experiences for all students;
6. individualized requirements are set for each student for promotion and graduation; and,
7. courses in basic skills, careers and life skills are required for all students which permit various levels of achievement.

These recommendations are based on what are perceived to be essential characteristics of an appropriate system. Such a system:

1. does <u>not</u> include statewide or district minimum competencies for promotion or graduation;
2. avoids the discrimination and stigma and due process problems of single statewide or district standards and avoids the problem of the minimums becoming the maximum, with the inevitable constriction of curriculum and achievement;

3. avoids the public deception inherent in setting a single very low state or district standard for graduation;
4. provides for the continuous renewal of education to meet the changing needs of society and students;
5. provides for the participation of students, parents, and community members in setting goals and providing instruction;
6. provides for a comprehensive curriculum capable of incorporating instruction and learning with regard to the broad goals of education;
7. incorporates minimum competency development on an individually guided basis;
8. provides for all students to become involved in the rewarding experience of paid employment as part of their required schooling beginning not later than their freshman year in high school;
9. provides for a broadened state supported program including career and vocational education for all students;
10. provides for an individualized educational program for all students in many ways synonymouswith programs available now to many handicapped students;

Such programs have demonstrated improved student achievement across all groups but especially with the higher and lower quartiles and with the drop-out prone. Such programs have demonstrated that they can be developed and operated at small additional costs. Such pro-rams can accommodate the wide diversity of American society while setting acceptable minimum requirements for all.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS. It is apparent that many questions about CBE/T remain unanswered. Research needs to be directed to these questions to provide meaningful and useful information to states such as Wisconsin which have yet to deal with mandated competency based education and testing. These questions include:

1. What groups have been the primary advocates of CBE/T and what were the primary issues addressed by each?
2. What time frames were established in other states for implementing CBE/T graduation requirements?
3. What form have mandated CBE/T programs taken at the state and local levels in other jurisdictions?
4. What level and type of resources have been provided to the SEA and LEAs in support of CBE/T development and implementation in other states?
5. What have been the curricular, instructional, and pupil assessment implications and consequences in other states as a result of mandated CBE/T?
6. What changes in pupil performances have been documented as a result of CBE/T?
7. What legal issues and decisions have resulted from state mandated CBE/T?

Research regarding these and other questions raised in this paper will permit Wisconsin to more appropriately address the goals of improving educational practices and student achievement in our public elementary and secondary schools. In addition to research data, however, it is clear that the public schools need extensive and on-going input from various publics in order to create and operate a more effective educational program.

It is abundantly clear that the issue of accountability in education must be addressed. At question, however, is the determination of what will be measured and how it can be measured in order to know how effective our instructional efforts have been. In considering various approaches to accountability, such as CBE/T, we must continue to respect and maintain the tradition of local planning in education. We must also respect the fact that various grassroots organizations in education may not be asking for initiatives such as CBE/T.

We know that it is a time in which our young people must be given assurance that they will have the opportunities necessary to develop adequate basic educational skills (e.g., those measured through CBE/T). We must, however, be ever vigilant that the effort to guarantee basic skills competencies is not achieved at the expense of comprehensive, expanded educational opportunities for all students. The challenge, for those who would establish CBE/T thrusts, is to integrate such approaches to assessment of educational outcomes respecting local determination, the involvement of grassroots organizations and approaching educational planning with the fullest respect for the needs and interests of individual students.

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